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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate that investigators are now focusing on the cognitive determinants of the attribution process: however, few researchers are looking specifically at the attribution process over time. The impact of attitudinal and behavioral information on impression formation was studied to determine how impressions change over time. The attitudinal information given to 80 subjects consisted of a series of statements purportedly made by a target person; the behavioral information consisted of an essay purportedly written by that person. Subjects were told either that the essay position had been freely chosen by the target person or that the essay position had been assigned. The influence of the essay was initially a function of both its content and diagnosticity. Two weeks later, however, the diagnosticity of the behavior exerted little influence. This result was similar to the "sleeper" effect in the area of attitude change. Findings suggest that it may be dangerous to assume that the immediate discounting of a given behavior means that the impression of the actor will remain unchanged, or that the content of the behavior will be ignored. (Author/KMF)

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IMPRESSION FORMATION AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES: A "SLEEPER" EFFECT?

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INTRODUCTION

Psychologists are currently advocating an interdisciplinary approach to the study of psychological issues. Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the recent attempts to investigate the relationship between cognitive processes and social behavior (cf. Carroll & Payne, 1976; Harvey, Ickes, & Kidd, 1976, 1978; Wyer, 1974). Individuals commonly find themselves in situations where they must integrate diverse types and often large quantities of information and subsequently make an interpretation or arrive at some type of judgment based upon their understanding of that information.

Researchers in the area of attribution theory have focused on a common theme: How do people interpret their own behaviors and the behaviors of others? Attribution theorists implicitly assume that individuals are intrinsically interested in the causes of behavior since this enables them to anticipate and control the behavior of others in given situations. Until recently, attribution theorists have not directly investigated cognitive processes such as encoding and retrieval. Rather, the focus has been on the resultant attribution itself accompanied by an implicit acknowledgment of the intervening processes. Studies using the typical attribution paradigm have converged on a number of well-corroborated findings. The extent to which a behavior is perceived to reflect an internal disposition of an actor is positively related to the degree to which that behavior appears to be free of any outside influences (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971). This principle has been

demonstrated in a number of experiments (Jones, Davis, & Gergen, 1961; Steiner & Field, 1960; Thibaut & Riecken, 1955). However, even when potential constraints on the actor's behavior are made quite evident to an observer, the tendency remains to assume that the behavior of an actor reflects the actor's true inclinations. This phenomenon has been demonstrated empirically on a number of different occasions (Jones & Harris, 1967; Schneider & Miller, 1975; Snyder & Jones, 1976; Miller, 1976). Stimulus materials are typically in the form of an essay that has purportedly been written by the actor.

Attribution theorists agree that individuals reflect on the available information when asked to make an attribution of some type. A few investigators are currently studying the relationship between memory and the attribution process. For example, Pryor and Kriss (1977) in two related studies manipulated the salience of information and found reaction times for recognizing the more salient information to be less and attributions of causality to be greater. Taylor and Fiske (1975) assumed that memory might mediate perceptions of causality but their results were inconclusive. Harvey, Yarkin, Lightner, Breslauer, and Strange (1978) found a positive relationship between the number of causal statements made by an observer when asked to view an interpersonal encounter and the accuracy of recall for the specifics of the interaction. The authors also discovered that subjects who were given instructions to remember as much as possible about the interaction were more apt to later describe it in terms of causal units. As these recent studies indicate, investigators are now focusing on the cognitive determinants of attribution processes. Relatively few researchers, however, have

looked specifically at the attribution process over the course of time. Therefore the major purpose of the present experiment was to determine how impressions and attributions change with the passage of time.

An individual's impression of a given person should naturally reflect the information made available about that person. If the pattern of information differs from one individual to another, their corresponding impressions should reflect this difference. However, behavioral information may not always be consistent with a previously held impression. In the present experiment we varied the consistency between the prior information provided about a given person and the subsequent behavior performed by that person. In addition we varied the diagnosticity of that behavior. The impressions people form should be influenced by the accumulation of new information. If a behavior of an actor is consistent with the impression formed from previous statements made by that actor, the impression should be strengthened. If the behavior is inconsistent, however, the impression should be weakened. Furthermore, the impact of a given behavior should be related to its diagnosticity. Impression change should be more likely to result when the actor freely chooses to engage in the behavior. However, such change should be less likely when the actor's behavior has been constrained in some manner. Our goal was to test the above predictions, both when the resulting impressions and attributions are measured immediately and when they are measured after a passage of time.

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 80 subjects from the subject pool of the

Psychology Department at Miami University volunteered for the experiment. Each participant was scheduled for two sessions, approximately two weeks apart.

Procedure. Two target persons were created by varying the attitude statements purportedly made by each. Ten liberal attitude statements and ten neutral statements were chosen as those to be made by the Liberal Target Person. Ten conservative attitude statements and the same ten neutral statements were chosen as those to be made by the Conservative Target Person. Two essays were also constructed, one generally favoring the legalization of marijuana and one generally opposing legalization.

The attitude stimuli were randomly displayed on a white screen for approximately three seconds by a Kodak Ektographic RA-960 Random Access Projector. All subjects were told that these statements had been endorsed by a fellow undergraduate. Half of the subjects viewed the ten liberal statements and the ten irrelevant statements. The remaining subjects viewed the ten conservative statements and the same ten irrelevant statements.

All subjects were then given an essay to read that had been purportedly written by the target person. Half of the subjects were given the pro-marijuana essay to read and half were given the anti-marijuana essay. Furthermore, half of the subjects were told that the target person had freely chosen the position taken in the essay and half were told that the target person had been assigned the position taken.

The design consisted of a 2 (Target Person's attitudes: Liberal vs. Conservative) X 2 (Essay Direction: Pro-marijuana vs. Anti-marijuana) X 2 (Writer's Choice: Free Choice vs. Assigned) complete

factorial with 10 subjects randomly assigned to each of the eight experimental conditions.

After everyone had finished reading the essay, subjects were asked to estimate the target person's true attitude toward the legalization of marijuana on a 0 (Strongly Opposed) to 10 (Strongly in Favor) scale. Subjects were then given a deck of computer cards which contained thirty new attitude statements and were instructed to rank the statements appearing on the cards from those most likely to be made by the target person to those least likely to be made by that person. These statements were also rated by subjects on a conservative-liberal dimension. A subject's rating of each statement was multiplied by its ranking. These resulting products were summed in order to provide a measure of each subject's current impression of the target person. Lower numbers indicated a more liberal impression and higher numbers indicated a more conservative impression. Subjects also simply rated the target person on a 0 (Conservative) to 10 (Liberal) scale.

All participants returned approximately two weeks later for the second session. At this time subjects responded to the dependent measures once again. At the conclusion of the second session, each participant was thanked for his or her participation in the research project.

Results. The impact of the essay on subjects' impressions was assessed by analyzing their ranking of the attitude statements. A marginally significant two-way interaction between essay direction and constraint ($F = 3.49$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .10$) reveals that during the first session the effect of essay direction on subjects'

impressions was greater when the essay position was freely chosen rather than assigned. The nature of the interaction is displayed in Figure 1. However, an analysis of the rankings collected two weeks later reveals no such interaction ($F = 1.53$, $df = 1/79$, p - ns). Instead there is only a main effect for essay direction ($F = 6.14$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, an analysis of the change scores between the first and second sessions reveals that the effect of essay direction is more pronounced at Time 2 than at Time 1 ($F = 4.03$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .05$). This difference is displayed in Figure 2).

An analysis of the ratings of the target person on the Conservative-Liberal dimension reveals a significant Essay Direction X Constraint interaction ($F = 6.99$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .01$) during the first session. The effect of essay direction on ratings was greater when the position taken in the essay had been freely chosen rather than assigned. This interaction is displayed in Figure 3. An analysis of the ratings made two weeks later reveals no such interaction ($F = 2.50$, $df = 1/79$, p = ns).

Thus, the behavior engaged in by the target person did affect subjects' impressions. However, the amount of constraint placed on the target person when writing the essay only mediated this effect when the impressions were measured immediately after subjects had read the essay. Two weeks later, only the position taken in the essay was significantly related to subjects' resultant impressions.

As expected, attributions of attitude were influenced by the attitude information provided about the target person, the position taken in the essay, and the constraint placed on the target person when writing the essay. The effect of essay direction

was much greater when the position taken in the essay was freely chosen rather than assigned to the target person. This was true regardless of the previous attitude information provided. The resulting interaction between essay direction and constraint within each Attitude condition is displayed graphically in Figure 4. This interaction was obtained both when the attribution was made immediately after reading the essay and when the attribution was made two weeks later (Time 1: $F = 52.11$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .01$; Time 2: $F = 40.55$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .01$). When the essay position was freely chosen by the target person, the effect of essay direction on attributions of attitude was substantial (Time 1: $F = 189.94$, $df = 1/39$, $p < .01$; Time 2: $F = 130.00$, $df = 1/39$, $p < .01$). However, when the essay position was purportedly assigned to the target person, the effect of essay direction on attributions of attitude was minimal (Time 1: $F = .17$, $df = 1/39$, p = ns; Time 2: $F = .04$, $df = 1/39$, p = ns).

On the other hand, as expected, the effect of the attitude information on attributions was inversely related to the essay's diagnosticity. That is, the effect of the attitude information was greater when the essay position was assigned to the essay writer rather than freely chosen. The interaction between attitude information and constraint was statistically significant both when the attribution was made immediately after reading the essay and when the attribution was made two weeks later (Time 1: $F = 8.30$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .01$; Time 2: $F = 4.41$, $df = 1/79$, $p < .05$). When the essay position was freely chosen by the target person, the effect of attitude information on attributions was not significant (Time 1: $F = 1.47$, $df = 1/39$, p = ns; Time 2: $F = 1.39$, $df = 1/39$, p = ns).

However, when the essay position was purportedly assigned to the target person, the effect of Attitude Direction on attributions was substantial (Time 1: $F = 16.15$, $df = 1/39$, $p < .01$; Time 2: $F = 10.64$, $df = 1/39$, $p < .01$). In sum, the utilization of the behavioral information appears to have been directly related to its diagnosticity, while the utilization of the attitude information was inversely related to the subsequent behavior's diagnosticity. Overall, these results provide a strong validation of previous findings in the area of attitude attribution.

DISCUSSION

Based on our results, we can conclude that individuals form predictable impressions about others on the basis of specific attitudinal information when combined with subsequent behavioral information. It should be noted that the attitude information provided for subjects in this research contained no glaring inconsistencies. In real life people's attitudes are probably not as systematic as those presented here. In fact, at times people may seem to be a bundle of contradictions. On the other hand, certain behaviors are more informative about an individual's true nature than others. In this research the directionality of the behavior (i.e., essay) was varied but each essay was only of moderate strength. If the essay writer had appeared to take a strong stand on the issue of the legalization of marijuana, the impact of this information may have been greater. A more detailed investigation would involve varying the strength as well as the direction of the stimulus information. In fact there may be ways of solidifying an impression in the mind of a perceiver other

than varying its strength. Tesser (1978) has demonstrated that attitudes toward a stimulus object become more polarized when individuals are instructed to spend time thinking about that object. Perhaps the impression of a target person can be strengthened in an analogous manner by asking individuals to think about the person for a few minutes based on the information provided. Another possibility is to have perceivers explicitly describe the target person in writing. Either type of procedure might make the impression more resistant to change.

As in other attribution studies, we have found that the effect of behavioral direction on attributions of attitude is less when the behavior has been constrained in some manner. Moreover, this is true regardless of whether the attribution is made immediately or later in time. However, the lack of <u>any</u> essay direction effect in the assigned condition appears to be inconsistent with earlier results which indicate that observers tend to continue to make attributions of attitude consistent with the essay position even when the position has been assigned. The majority of these previous studies, however, did not specifically create a behavioral expectancy. Jones, Worchel, Goethals, and Grumet (1971) did manipulate behavioral expectancies and discovered that when weak essays were written under constraint conditions and were inconsistent with the behavioral expectancy, judges attributed attitudes in reverse of the essay's directionality. Since a behavioral expectancy was created in the present research, and since the essays used were only moderate in strength, the lack of any direction effect in the assigned condition is not surprising.

The finding that attributions made two weeks later paralleled

those made immediately after reading the essay is consistent with results of a recent study conducted by Jones, Riggs, and Quattrone (1979). These authors originally thought that the choice/assigned information might be forgotten later. Therefore, they predicted that the attributions of perceivers who were initially informed that the essay position had been assigned would later shift in a direction more correspondent with the essay position. However, they discovered that this was not the case. The results of our research are consistent with this finding.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of our research is the finding that initially the influence of a behavior on people's impressions is a function of both its direction and its diagnosticity. As time passes, however, the diagnosticity of that behavior becomes less important. The diminishing effect of the constraint information is analogous to a sleeper effect in the area of attitude change. Previous results indicate that the information in a persuasive communication tends to be remembered while related information concerning the source's credibility tends to be forgotten (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kelman & Hovland, 1953). In the present case, the position taken in the essay was apparently remembered two weeks later while the accompanying constraint information no longer exerted an effect. Of course, if the essays had themselves been extremely strong the constraint information may have wielded little influence either initially or later. In any case, it does appear that with the passage of time certain types of information may assume more weight than others and that later impressions tend to reflect this difference.

Apparently the constraint information was important to

perceivers when it had direct implications for a judgment to be made, such as an attribution. However, the directionality of the essay took precedence over the accompanying constraint information when perceivers were asked to indicate their general impression of the target person. This result may have certain practical implications. Suppose, for example, that a prisoner or war or a hostage makes a series of unpatriotic statements. Observers may readily acknowledge that the behavior was constrained and they may also assume that these statements are not an accurate reflection of the person's true attitudes. However, if the results of this research are any indication, impressions of the person may still change as a result of the person's behavior. Thus it may be dangerous to assume that the immediate discounting of a given behavior means that the impression of the actor will remain unchanged or that the content of the behavior will be ignored.

Whatever direction future research in this area should take, it promises to be both provocative and stimulating. More importantly, the outcome of such research should contribute substantially to a better understanding of human behavior.

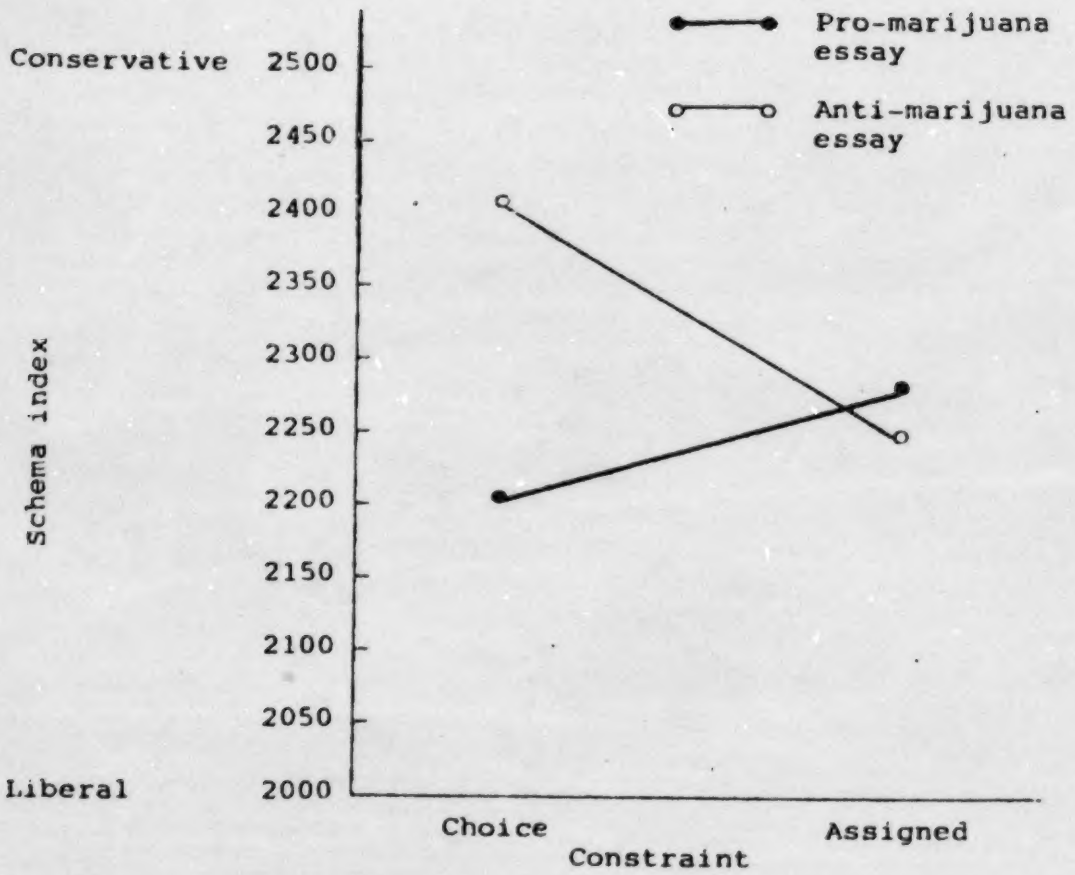

Figure 1 Attitude schema as a function of essay direction and writer's constraint (Time 1)

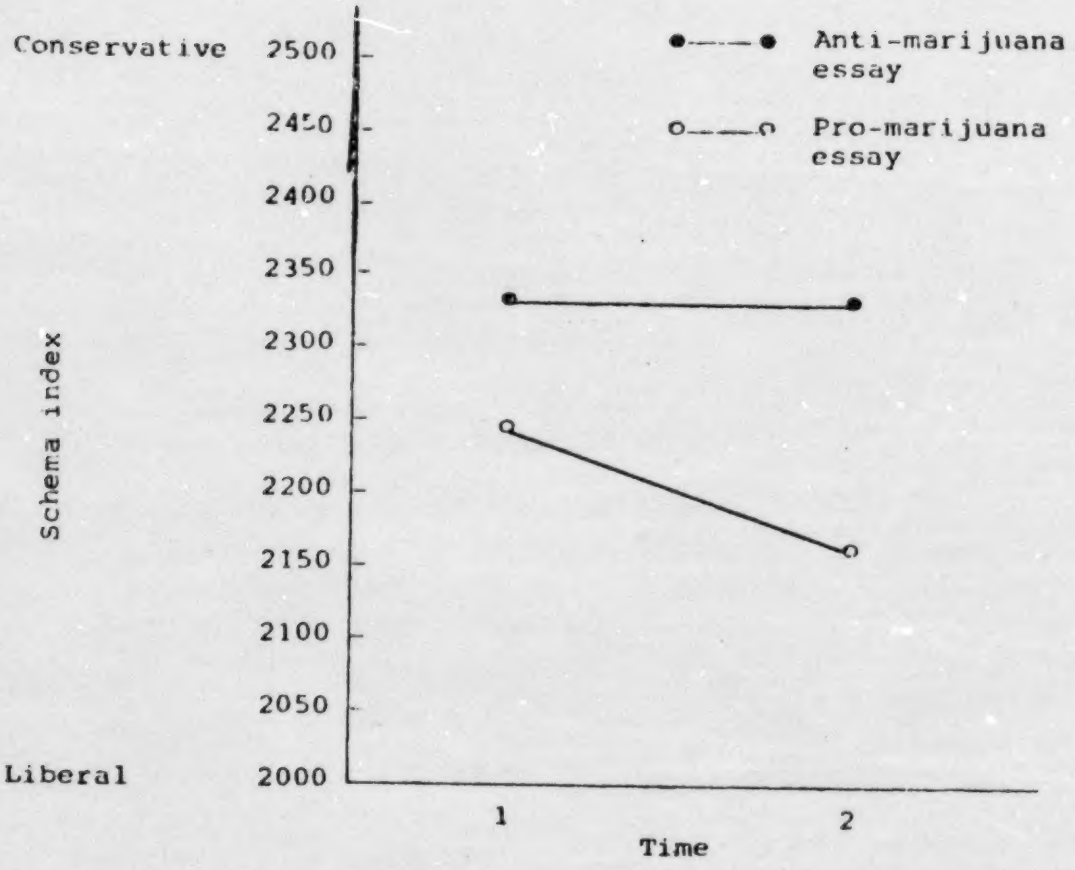

Figure 2 Attitude schema as a function of essay direction and time

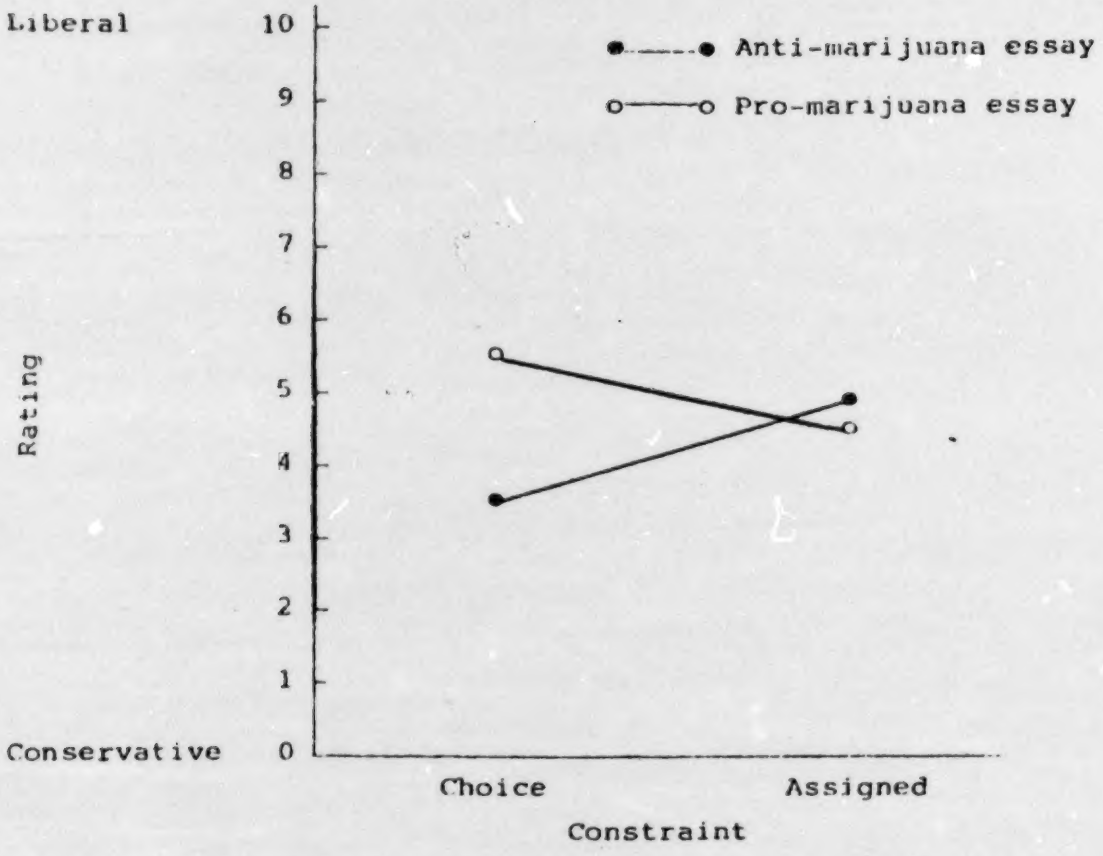

Figure 3 Ratings of the target person on the conservative-liberal dimension as a function of essay direction and writer's constraint (Time 1)

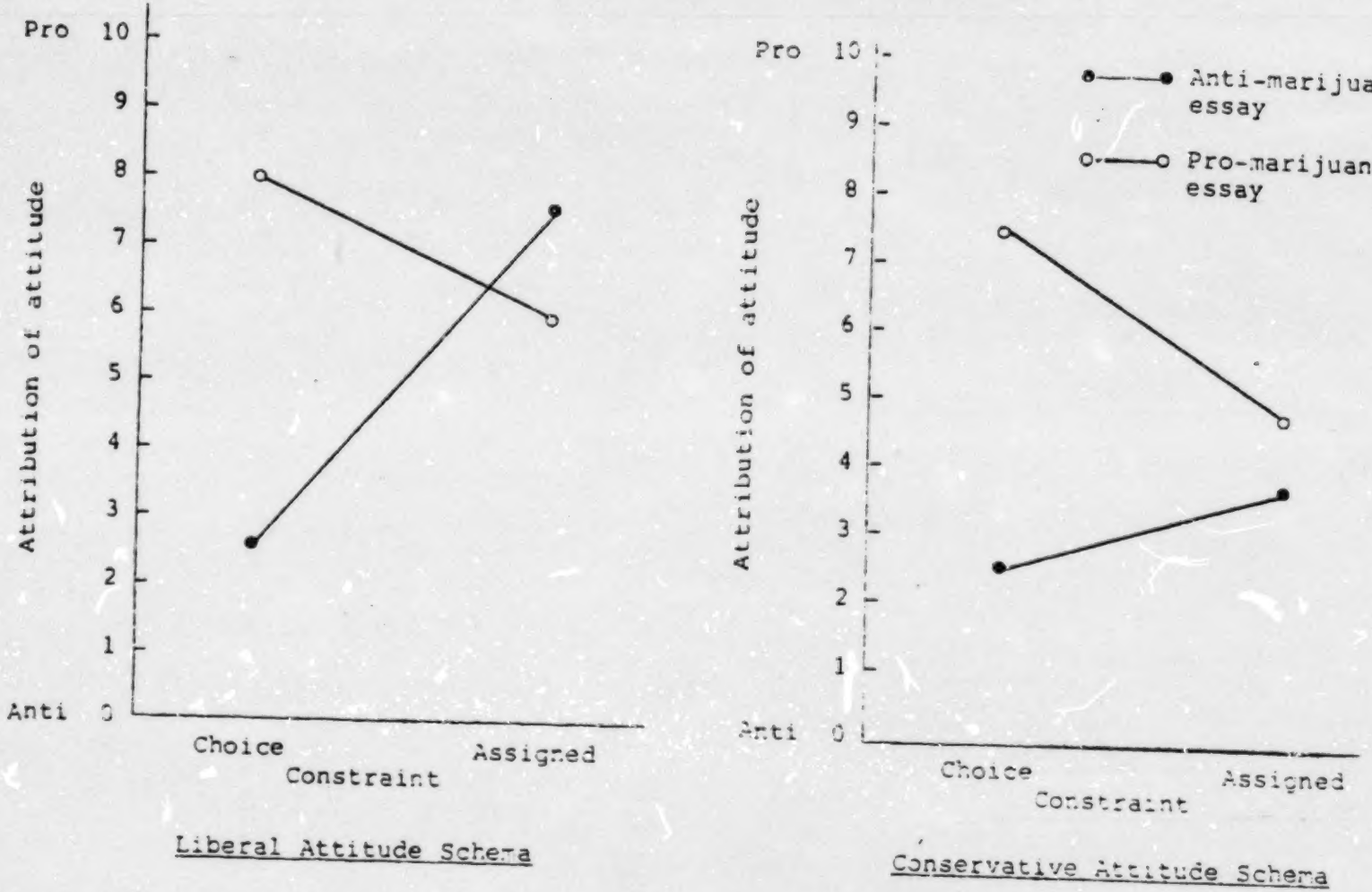

Figure 4 Attribution of attitude as a function of attitude schema, essay direction, and writer's constraint (Time 1)

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